

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
August 14, 2003

GUALALA BLUFFTOP TRAIL, PHASE II

File No. 03-073
Project Manager: Moira McEnespy

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$38,500 to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy to construct the second phase of the Gualala Blufftop Trail.

LOCATION: West of Highway 1, town of Gualala, Mendocino County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed thirty-eight thousand five hundred dollars (\$38,500) to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy (RCLC) to construct the second phase of the Gualala Blufftop Trail on easements held by the RCLC west of Highway 1 and north of the Gualala River, in the town of Gualala, Mendocino County, subject to the condition that the project shall not commence and no funds shall be disbursed for the project until:

1. The Executive Officer has approved in writing:
 - a. A project work program, budget, and timeline;
 - b. The use of any contractors to carry out all or part of the project; and
 - c. A signing plan that acknowledges Conservancy funding.
2. RCLC has entered into and recorded agreements pursuant to Public Resources Code Sections 31116(c) and 831.5, to protect the public interest in improvements funded under this grant, and to afford the RCLC the same level of immunity as afforded a public entity.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed Gualala Blufftop Trail project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

2. The proposed Gualala Blufftop Trail project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
 3. The Redwood Coast Land Conservancy is a private nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$38,500 to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy (RCLC) to construct the second phase of the Gualala Blufftop Trail.

In October 1994, the RCLC accepted three offers to dedicate public access easements, two lateral and one vertical. In its management plan for the easements, the RCLC states its intent to develop the trail to give the public access to the scenic beauty of the Gualala River estuary, native flora, bird watching, whale watching, and views of the Pacific Ocean, and to provide a safe alternative for walking between businesses in the commercial district of Gualala.

In June 1997, the Conservancy authorized funds to assist the RCLC in developing the trail. Phase I included surveying the easement boundaries, conducting a geologic study, designating a vertical accessway (through a motel parking lot) with painted pavement symbols and posted signs, installing a viewpoint at the northern terminus, and constructing 570 linear feet of trail southward. Because the southern trail easement includes physical features that pose a challenge to trail development, such as proximity to drains, the Conservancy subsequently assisted the RCLC with more engineering design work (for a needed footbridge) under a retainer contract.

The RCLC now plans to construct the second phase of the Gualala Blufftop Trail, which will run 700 feet from the southern end of the Phase I segment to the end of the southern easement, about a half-mile north of the Gualala River Bridge. The trail will continue the linkage of commercial and hotel properties that front the Gualala River. Similar to the northern segment, the pedestrian-only trail will be five feet wide, and compacted crushed shale will create an all-weather surface capable of accommodating wheelchairs. Phase II will also include a 45-foot-long bridge over a landslide escarpment; a stairway enabling vertical access to the trail, the landing of which will span a concrete drainage swale; fencing; drought-tolerant landscaping; and installation of signs (see Exhibit 1). It is anticipated that construction will begin in September and be completed in November 2003.

Completion of this project, Phase II, will complete the opening of the OTDs to the public and add a segment to the California Coastal Trail. Per the RCLC's management plan, trail maintenance will be carried out by a volunteer committee.

Site Description: The 25-foot-wide access easement is bounded to the north by the existing trail segment (Phase I), which terminates at the southern property line of the Surf Motel, and to the south by a drainage culvert on the north side of the Breakers Inn. This culvert was probably historically a natural drainage, but the ditch floor is now cemented, and a culvert has been installed alongside to help channel winter rains from the Inn's

parking lot to the river. To the east are commercial buildings, and to the west is the Gualala River. Blufftop vegetation consists largely of weeds typical of ruderal areas, with a few garden escapees such as nasturtiums and *Vinca*.

Project History: In October 1994, the RCLC accepted two 25-foot-wide adjacent lateral OTDs (Humber to the north and Bower to the south), extending from residential property just north of the Sea Cliff Motel south to the Gualala Redwoods property (about a half-mile north of the Gualala River Bridge, at the southern end of the Ocean Song Restaurant). The RCLC also accepted a five-foot-wide vertical access easement across the Surf Motel property from Highway 1 to the mean high tide line that the landowner (Bower) agreed exists via prescriptive rights. In June 1997, the Conservancy authorized funds to assist the RCLC in developing Phase I of the trail. The Conservancy subsequently assisted the RCLC by providing more engineering design work for Phase II under a retainer contract.

PROJECT FINANCING:

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|---|-----------------|
| Coastal Conservancy | \$38,500 |
| RCLC donations and in-kind services and materials | <u>5,000</u> |
| Total Project Cost: | \$43,500 |

Conservancy funding is expected to come from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2000 (Proposition 40) bond funds allocated for development, restoration, and protection of land and water resources in accordance with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation. The proposed trail project is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, specifically Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, and is thus consistent with the purposes of this funding source. The RCLC will provide a match in the form of volunteer labor and donations of in-kind services and materials.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400 *et seq.*) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states the Legislature’s intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. The proposed project will complete construction of a public pedestrian trail along a blufftop overlooking the coastline. The proposed funding authorization is thus consistent with §31400.

Section 31400.3 allows the Conservancy to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. RCLC, which will carry out the proposed project, is a private nonprofit organization existing under §501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, having among its principal charitable purposes the preservation of land for recreational, educational, agricultural, scenic and open space opportunities. The proposed funding authorization thus meets the requirement of §31400.3 to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and is thus consistent with this section.

The Gualala Blufftop Trail will provide a link in the California Coastal Trail, enabling users to walk the coastline west of Highway 1. Hence, the proposed project is also consis-

tent with §31408(a), which directs the Conservancy to coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective C** and **Goal 2 Objective C**, the proposed project consists of adding a 700-foot segment to the Gualala Blufftop trail, thereby completing opening of an offer-to-dedicate a public access easement that Redwood Coast Land Conservancy acquired in October 1994. The trail will overlook the Gualala River estuary and become an off-highway link in the California Coastal Trail.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** See letters of support in Exhibit 2.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the town of Gualala.
5. **Need:** The RCLC is an all-volunteer nonprofit organization that has committed to the task of accepting and opening three OTDs. Conservancy assistance is now needed to enable the RCLC to develop and open the final trail segment.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Mendocino coast is a statewide and national scenic and recreational destination. State Highway 1 is the closest public road to the trail, and has traffic counts of approximately 6,000 vehicles per day in the summer. In addition, RCLC monitors use of the Phase I segment of the trail on a weekly basis, and reports usage of more than 20,000 people per year.

Additional Criteria

12. **Readiness:** The RCLC has been involved in the Gualala Blufftop Trail project since October 1994, and is now poised to conduct this final phase.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has been involved in the Gualala Blufftop Trail project since 1994. Completion of this project will further the Conservancy's goal of seeing OTDs opened to the public, build upon the Conservancy's efforts in developing and opening Phase I of the trail, and further the development of an off-highway route for the California Coastal Trail.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the relevant portions of the Coastal Element of the Mendocino County Land Use Plan, which is part of the Local Coastal Program (LCP). The LCP was certified by the Coastal Commission on September 10, 1992.

The Land Use Plan contains coastal element policies pertaining to shoreline access. Policy number 3.6-6 states in relevant part that "Shoreline access points shall be at frequent rather than infrequent intervals for the convenience of both residents and visitors and to minimize impacts on marine resources at any one point."

Policy number 4.12-18 states in relevant part that the "[o]ffer of access by Bower shall be accepted; to provide the potential for completion of a public trail from Central Gualala to Gualala bridge. The trail shall follow along the blufftop and shoreline, segments may need to use the public right of way of Highway 1 over impassable areas."

Appendix 13, "Summary of Designated Coastal Access Points and Trail System," lists the Gualala Blufftop trail as Item 106.

The proposed project will complete a public pedestrian access trail over the accepted Bower access easement along the blufftop in Gualala, directly overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The proposed project is thus consistent with the relevant policies contained in the Mendocino County LCP.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed trail project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the following reasons:

The proposed project qualifies as a Class 4 categorical exemption pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15304 in that it consists of minor private alterations in the condition of land and vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees.

The proposed project also qualifies as a Class 3 categorical exemption pursuant to §15303 in that it consists of construction of limited numbers of new, small structures, specifically a five foot-wide trail, a small bridge over a slide escarpment, and a stairway spanning a drainage swale and enabling vertical access to the trail from a parking area along the route.

Finally, the proposed project qualifies as a Class 32 categorical exemption pursuant to §15332. Specifically, the project will constitute an in-fill development, completing connection of a series of commercial areas and hotels. Furthermore, it is consistent with the general plan and applicable zoning; will occur within the town limits of Gualala; and will be constructed on a site that has no value as habitat for endangered, rare, or threatened species (Botanical Survey by Mary Rhyne, August 6, 2001; bird survey by Evelyn Wadsworth, July 15, 2003). The proposed project will not require any grading; heavy equipment use will be minimal (a bobcat tractor will be operated four days; a backhoe will be operated two days; and a dump truck will be operated for about eight hours total during the construction window); and all work will be conducted at least five feet from the bluff edge. There will thus be no significant effects relating to traffic, noise, air quality, or water quality. Finally, the proposed project will not require any additional utility or public services.

Exhibit 3: Staff Recommendation for Project No. 03-073, "Gualala Blufftop Trail, Phase II" (August 14, 2003)

EXHIBIT 2

Letters of Support